

**Maine Department of Agriculture, Food and Rural Resources
Specialty Crop Block Grant Program**

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Project Title: Specialty Crop Producer Database

Project Summary

The Maine Department of Agriculture was currently operating with a producer database that was over 10 years old. The current database was created prior to the advances in technology that have lead to web-based promotions and information listings. This database had become outdated and was no longer the right vehicle for our current promotional needs and efforts on behalf of Maine's agricultural and specialty crop producers – our constituents.

Accurate and timely information from our specialty crop producers must be made available to the consuming public as well as to a number of agricultural service providers, including Department staff. It must also serve a dual purpose in acting as an updatable storehouse of business development information and resources for agricultural producers. The Department of Agriculture database needed to be the central point of reference for retailers and manufacturers that want to source Maine specialty crop products.

The grant funds requested were used to design and develop this flexible and comprehensive database that will house data about all Maine specialty crop producers. It also provided the information needed for printed and electronic promotional and business development materials. The producer database was dovetailed seamlessly with the state's current web-based search features that connect consumers to producers and producers to wholesalers and distributors through our promotional website at www.getrealmaine.com.

Project Approach

The design of the database began with assistance from our computer systems department, assisting the division in development of design features for the database. During the project year the Department staff worked with the state database developers to finish the database fields to go into the database, and for the database to be coupled with a web-based front end for consumers and producers. The database was initially being designed by the Office of Information and Technology's development staff.

At the 2009 Maine Agricultural Trades show in January of 2009 we began the outreach to producers through presentations at commodity groups meetings and at the Department of Agriculture booth to encourage producers to sign up for their user accounts for the new database system. While the database and web interface was not completed, it gave us a chance to make producers aware of what was coming. This also provided us additional listings of producers interested in being promoted on the new promotional website. We gained about 10 new producers from the show.

By June, OIT development staff had not provided a good final web interface for the database and we also found out they had not done the backend database development correctly as well. The Commissioner met with OIT administration and decided to put the project out to a private contractor to finish the database and web interface. Clarity-Connect of North Carolina was contracted, and they have been working with the project administrator to review the database fields, and to complete the web interface.

The transition from the old database to the new database was seamless. We basically downloaded all data to an excel spreadsheet and Clarity used the fields and data directly into their new database for the website. We tweaked the old database fields with new ones we needed and added them to the spreadsheet before uploading to Clarity-Connect.

By January, 2010 the new farmer database was completed as an excel spreadsheet, and the majority of the web-based work was done. We went live with the new database and website on January 15th, 2010 and the site can be accessed at www.getrealmaine.com.

We also included a whole new section on frequently asked questions. A lot of our young farmers are interested in getting into the produce business, so questions on beginning farm information were highlighted first in the FAQ sections.

We decided not to increase the CSA listing on the website, but instead have been pointing folks to the Maine Organic Gardeners and Farmers Website since they do a better job of tracking the CSA's. We have been encouraging specialty crop farmers to list CSA as one of their product offerings on the website and in another grant we are working on a search function for the CSA listing.

The Department staff continued to outreach to the specialty crop producers at our Agricultural Trade Show and at our recent Farmers Market Workshop to sign up for the new website.

Goal and outcomes achieved

We have met the goal of getting the database format completed, getting the web-based format up and running, and signing up new farmers. We have met the goal of having 10 % more farmer's sign up for the website. Our initial database of farmers was approximately 850. We now have over 1000 farmers signed up and more are being added every week.

We have also met our goal of training staff and make data entry much smoother for farmers and staff. This new format does allow for producers to access the new database through their individual user accounts which will enable them to change and update data

We are grateful to our partner, Clarity-Connect, for the effort they put in to correct the errors of the State OIT development staff, and make the new system work on time. We

are also working with other websites in Maine that promote specialty crop producers and we have partnered with them, and they with us, in supporting each others website.

Beneficiaries

This beneficiaries are the 1000 farmers who are now participating in the web-based promotional website. In addition, the Department will benefit by being able to present information about the specialty crop producers and by integrating the producer database with the business development resources for producers (agencies, organizations, publications and contacts to help producers grow and manage their agricultural business endeavors). The Department will now have all the information at our fingertips, easily updatable and available to multiple staff users and ready to provide to consumers, thus achieving a level of efficiency in our work that will let us spend more time tending to the marketing and production needs of producers. It will allow for more timely advertising and promotion of our specialty crop producers.

The other beneficiaries are the consumers. The web-based component will assist consumers in locating products, farm stands and agri-tourism venues throughout the state.

Lessons Learned

Throughout this project the Department learned that the young people of this generation get it in regards to use of the internet medium. We employed summer college interns to get this work done, and they did so very professionally and in a timely fashion.

We also learned that most farmers are starting to get it in regard to the use of the new medium. One of the challenges is getting them accustomed to updating their information on the internet. Currently we assist approximately 50% of the farmers. We hope to have that number go down to 0% in the coming years.

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Project Title: GAP/GHP Certification Cost Share Program

Project Summary

The Maine Department of Agriculture, Division of Market and Production Development has been working closely with schools, retailers, and farmers to help guide them through the process of Good Agricultural Practices (GAP) and Good Handling Practices (GHP) certification. This has been a relatively new program for Maine specialty crop farmers and the Department has been taking a lead role along with Cooperative Extension and a contractor, AgMatters, Inc in educating farmers about the requirements of this program. One of the hurdles for most small farms is the cost of the required audit. More schools and retailers are moving towards requiring GAP/GHP certification from all their suppliers.

The grant funds that were requested for this project were used to assist specialty crop producers in paying the cost of a first time GAP/GHP audit. This increased access to affordable GAP/GHP audits helped increase the producers' markets for their products.

Project Approach

The Maine Department of Agriculture's Division of Market and Production Development and Division of Quality Assurance were responsible for this project. The supervisor of the GAP/GHP Audit program planned, implemented and evaluated this project. This individual has received extensive training from USDA regarding GAP/GHP practices and certification.

The major retail grocery chains, food processors and local school systems in Maine were in the process of designing criteria for their suppliers that would require GAP/GHP certification. They notified the Department that they were planning to adopt 'GAP/GHP certified' status for their suppliers. The Department worked with these companies and processors to identify farmers who may need certification.

The planning for this project was completed prior to the Maine Agricultural Trades Show, held in mid-January, 2008. Information and publicity for the program was presented in workshops and in the Department's trade show booth at that event. Educational materials and forms were distributed throughout the late winter and early spring in an effort to get farmers on board for GAP/GHP audits for the 2008 growing season.

The Department set up a system to provide direct funds to farmers to help reimburse them for their audits. Cost reimbursement would be at a rate not to exceed \$400 per audit for up to 97 farmers. The Department spent funds on the production and dissemination of

educational and promotional materials for the project. The design costs for these materials were paid from non-grant sources. Information on the program was provided to the Maine fruit and vegetable industry to make them aware of this project. Growers were contacted through commodity association meetings, newsletters, and direct mail. Information publicizing the program was presented at the annual Maine Agricultural Trades Show. The information that was disseminated emphasized the importance of following GAP/GHP practices. The information also included procedures growers should follow in order to become GAP/GHP certified. It also provided detailed information on the steps necessary to participate in the cost share program.

The growers that successfully completed a GAP/GHP audit submitted their application for cost share reimbursement to the Maine Department of Agriculture. Once the department certified that the grower has successfully completed the audit and provided documentation of the payment; the department processed the reimbursement.

Goals and Outcomes achieved

The program provided reimbursements to a total of 98 producers.

Beneficiaries

This project had the potential to impact over 200 producers and growers in the State of Maine. It assured that producers, who are currently marketing their products to local retailers and schools would still be able to maintain these markets once the GAP/GHP requirements were instituted by the entities. This included over 70 farmers currently supplying one chain of retail stores.

This project increased the number of GAP/GHP certified producers in Maine by 100%. As a result of the cost sharing for the audits we anticipated that local retail and school food service markets will be opened up to 20 additional producers during the course of this project.

Lessons Learned

This project showed that the GAP/GHP program is important to farmers and markets and will continue to be necessary as food safety becomes more important in the marketplace.

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Project Title: Harvest New England Program

Project Summary

The Harvest New England program is a cooperative marketing and educational association comprised of the director's of marketing for the six New England state departments of agriculture. The organization has been in existence for fifteen years and has successfully spearheaded several regional marketing efforts.

The original premise of the organization was that the individual states might not be able to break into larger retail markets individually with their own branded programs, but that a 'New England' identifier could provide the inroads necessary to open up these markets that are looking to buy local.

This project was to support the development and implementation of a specialty farmer Direct Marketing conference in 2009.

Project Approach

A committee representing each of the six New England States developed and coordinated the Direct Marketing Conference. The directors of marketing for each of the New England states met regularly to develop and implement activities to further promote Harvest New England. Specific efforts included direct one on one meetings with retailers and informational exhibits at the trade show. These efforts continued throughout the grant period.

The conference was designed to assist producers in marketing their specialty crops direct to consumers and wholesalers. Pamphlets and point of sale materials were provided to enhance the visibility of New England products in the marketplace.

Goals and Outcomes Achieved

We expect to increase participation in this event by 20% from the 700 participants that attended the 2007 conference. The conference met that goal of increasing participation and actually had 800 participants attend in 2009.

The Department helped to coordinate the Online Ordering Workshop presented at the Conference. The workshop was attended by 75 farmers. The farmers felt the workshop was worthwhile as reported in a comprehensive survey conducted at the end of the conference by the State of Connecticut. That survey was summarized in their Specialty Crop final report. However, for this workshop, of the 125 surveys returned, 11 farmers specifically noted that the online workshop was very helpful to them. The overall assessment from the survey was very positive from these farmers.

Lessons Learned

Representatives from each of the six New England states have comprised the organizational committee for this conference, and they include Massachusetts, Connecticut, Rhode Island, Vermont and New Hampshire. Because the conference was so successful, the Department has continued to participate with the other New England states in planning for another conference in the winter of 2011.

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Project Title: MPB Specialty Crop Marketing and Promotion Campaign

Project Summary

The Maine Potato Board (MPB) is requested and received funds, to build awareness of, and promote the purchase of, Maine potatoes. The Maine Potato Board used the requested funds to conduct a fall potato promotional campaign that ran on two television stations in the southern Maine market during the months of November and December. The goal of the fall promotion was to increase the sales of Maine potatoes during the holiday season.

The MPB also used the requested funds to conduct a marketing campaign that informed the public of the importance of supporting the Maine potato industry. This campaign used print media as well as radio. The target audiences are the citizens of Maine, with a focus on those who reside outside of Aroostook County. This campaign began in January of 2010 and ran through April 2010.

The final two activities included funding to support our participation in the Produce Marketing Association show in September of 2009, as well as our participation in the National Potato Council Seed Expo held in January of 2010.

Project Approach

The Maine Potato Board was responsible for this project. The Director of Development and Grower Relations implemented this project.

The purpose of this proposed project is to build awareness of, and promote the purchase of, Maine potatoes.

The MPB marketing and promotional campaign contained four components. They are as follows:

- 2009 Fall Promotion
- 2009 Produce Marketing Association Show
- 2010 Industry Support Campaign
- 2010 National Potato Council Seed Expo

Beginning when grant funds were awarded, the MPB worked with Marketing Advertising and Planning (MAP), a marketing firm in Presque Isle, Maine, to develop a television advertising campaign with the goal of increasing sales of Maine table-stock potatoes during the Holiday season. The fall and early winter Holiday season provides one of the greatest opportunities for the sale of table-stock potatoes during the entire year. Funding

for this component was used for costs associated with ad development and the purchase of airtime. Often our growers are faced with competition in the Market from other states that produce potatoes, as well as Canada.

The MPB began when grant funds were awarded, to plan and organize our participation in the Produce Marketing Association show that took place in Anaheim, California on October 3-5, 2009. The 2009 Fresh Summit, as the show is called, is one of the premier produce shows in the world. It takes place annually and draws a crowd of over 17,000 attendees, representing over 70 countries. The Maine Potato Board will be one of 720 exhibitors. This show will put Maine potatoes in a setting that includes companies such as Dole, Chiquita, Sunkist, and Del Monte. There are several countries that exhibited produce as well, including the countries of Brazil, Argentina, and Mexico. Maine potatoes compete in a global marketplace. Fresh Summit 2009 helps to keep us in front of our buyers at a show where the competition for those buyers' attention will be great.

The MPB started working with Huard Marketing, a marketing firm located in Portland, Maine, in the fall of 2009 to develop a marketing campaign that encourages the support of the Maine potato industry. The goal of this marketing component is to increase the consumption of Maine potatoes. This campaign began in January of 2010 and ran through May of 2010. This campaign included print media as well as radio. We did some limited media buys in Aroostook County. Funding was used to develop a marketing campaign that meets our stated goals, as well as for the purchase of print media and radio airtime.

Maine has one of the toughest potato seed certification laws in North America. We believe as an industry that strong seed certification standards result in fewer disease and pest issues during the growing season. Beginning in the fall of 2009, the MPB planned and organized our participation in the National Potato Council's Seed Expo 2010. This event took place in Orlando, Florida the first week in January 2010. The National Potato Council Seed Expo draws potato growers from all of the potato production areas in North America. The Expo highlights potato seed producing states and provinces. The goal of our participation in the expo was to place our potato seed industry in a national spotlight and provide potato growers with an alternative seed source that has the highest standards in the industry.

Goals and Outcomes achieved

The MPB completed all four components of this project. The PMA show in Orlando Florida had an attendance of over 18,500 from over 50 countries. The National Potato Council Seed Expo had over 600 register attendees form both Canada and the US.

Both the 2009 Fall Promotion and the 2010 industry support campaign were successfully implemented. Two distinct 30 second television ads ran in the Central and Southern Maine market on two separate television stations for a total of two months. The industry support campaign developed several print ads that ran in several newspapers in the State

from January through May of 2010. The MPB also ran many 15 second radio spots during the same time frame.

The resulting numbers of consumer “hits” is as follows:

Component 1 Television Campaign

WLBZ starting November 15, 2009 through November 25, 2009

WLBZ December 7, 2009 through December 27, 2009

WCSH December 14, 2009 through December 27, 2009

Estimated number of people reached by this activity, 150,000 – 225,000

Component 2 350 Industry Reviews distributed

500 recipe brochures distributed

Over 19,000 people in attendance

Component 3 Radio Campaign

WPOR January 18, 2010 through January 31, 2010

WGAN January 18, 2010 through January 31, 2010

WVOM January 19, 2010 through January 31, 2010

WVOM February 8, 2010 through February 26, 2010

WGAN February 15, 2010 through February 28, 2010

WPOR February 15, 2010 through February 28, 2010

WGAN March 15, 2010 through March 28, 2010

WPOR March 15, 2010 through March 28, 2010

WVOM March 8, 2010 through March 19, 2010

WVOM April 5, 2010 through April 16, 2010

Estimated number of people reached by this activity, 75,000 – 100,000

Newspaper Campaign

Portland Press Herald/ Maine Sunday Telegram February, March, April

2010

Bangor Daily News February, March, April 2010

Kennebec Journal February, March, April 2010

Estimated number of people reached by this activity, 165,000

Component 4 200 Industry Reviews distributed.

100 recipe brochures distributed.

150 seed promotional brochures distributed.

Between 800 and 1000 people were in attendance

Beneficiaries

The primary beneficiary of this project was the potato industry in Maine. The MPB was created to provide a competitive environment for Maine's potato growers, processors, and dealers, and to create both stability and the infrastructure for future growth, while promoting economic importance to the state and quality of product. The Board is an information and advisory resource for Maine's potato growers, dealers, and processors, as well as the general public on all matters relating to potatoes in Maine.

Other beneficiaries of this project are the individuals that purchase and consume Maine potatoes. The following facts are just some of the dietary benefits of potatoes:

Based on the FDA label the following

Claims can be made for the potato:

- An excellent source (> 20 percent of the DV) of vitamin C
- A good source (> 10 percent of the DV) of potassium
- A good source (> 10 percent of the DV) of vitamin B6
- Low (< 140 mg/serving) in sodium and cholesterol
- Fat-free (< 0.5 g fat/serving)

Lessons Learned

These venues for supporting and promoting the potato industry are very important and meet the needs of farmers to get the Maine potato recognized as a key player in the market.

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